

SLOVAKIA 2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Slovak Republic is a multiparty parliamentary democracy led by a prime minister and a 150-member parliament (Narodna Rada or National Council). Prime Minister Eduard Heger, who replaced Igor Matovic in April, heads a four-party coalition that secured a majority in parliament following free and fair parliamentary elections in 2020. In 2019 voters elected Zuzana Caputova to a five-year term as president and head of state in free and fair elections.

The national police force has sole responsibility for internal and border security and reports to the Ministry of Interior. A special anticorruption police department, special prosecution unit, and specialized criminal court address corruption cases. The Bureau of Border and Alien Police, under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, is responsible for external security, including border control and preventing illegal migration, human smuggling, and trafficking in persons, and conducts investigations of related criminal activities. The Bureau of Border and Alien Police also exercises limited powers in asylum proceedings. Civilian authorities maintained effective control over security forces. There were no new credible reports that members of security forces committed abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: high-level corruption; violence and threats of violence against Roma and members of other ethnic and racial minorities; and violence and threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons.

The government investigated reports of abuses by members of the security forces and other government institutions, as well as reports of government corruption, although some observers questioned the thoroughness of these investigations.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically

Motivated Killings

There were no reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings. The Bureau of the Inspection Service, which falls under the state police, is responsible for investigating whether security force killings were justifiable. The prosecution service conducts prosecutions.

b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The constitution and the law prohibit such practices, and the government mostly respected these provisions.

In 2020 a Bratislava district court acquitted a police officer in the 2017 case of alleged police abuse during witness interrogation at the Senec police station. The court concluded that the witness was apparently subjected to brutal physical violence but that evidence against the police officer was insufficient. As of November, an appeal was pending. During the investigation of the incident, a leaked recording revealed that the head of the criminal investigation unit advised his subordinates to coordinate their testimony to present a consistent narrative of the event. Police inspectors charged the police unit head with abetting the crime. Court proceedings were pending.

A report released in 2019 by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) found several credible allegations of deliberate physical mistreatment consisting of kicks and baton blows prior to or immediately following police arrest. The report also cited allegations of threats and verbal abuse by police officers. The CPT criticized the continuing practice of handcuffing detained persons to wall fixtures or similar objects in police establishments for several hours and occasionally overnight.

Impunity was a problem in the security forces. The Bureau of the Inspection

Service of the Ministry of Interior dismissed or discontinued most investigations into cases involving injuries allegedly caused by police. The independence of the Inspection Service was criticized as insufficient by international standards. Members of the Inspection Service are formally part of the Police Corps, the institution they are tasked to investigate. The former head of the Inspection Service, Adrian Szabo, was arrested and dismissed from his function in June. Szabo confessed to accepting bribes in exchange for leaking information to a police official. In December the president signed a legal amendment passed by parliament that strengthens the powers of the minister of interior concerning appointment and dismissal of the Police Corps president as well as the Inspection Service head and introduces an indefinite (instead of the four-year) mandate for these positions. The ombudsperson repeatedly suggested strengthening the independence of the Inspection Service as well as implementing the use of cameras to monitor police interventions and use of force. Based on the suggestion, in July the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality adopted a resolution and recommendations calling on the government to implement the necessary measures.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

There were no significant reports regarding the physical condition of prison or detention centers that raised human rights concerns.

Physical Conditions: The CPT's 2019 report noted that prisoners sentenced under the strictest confinement regime were offered extremely limited daily out-of-cell time. The ombudsperson also noted inadequate air circulation in prison cells, insufficient lighting, and inappropriate toilet placement. There were reports of very small and inadequately equipped facilities at police stations that authorities used for the temporary detention of persons.

In an annual report released in April, the ombudsperson repeated previous findings that police units had established unauthorized spaces where police detained individuals under conditions not always in line with the law, citing overnight detention in an inadequately equipped room or serious shortcomings in official records on the use and justification of coercive measures or medical information on a detainee's injuries.

The ombudsperson identified inadequate justification for the use of coercive measures in police records. Based on the ombudsperson's suggestion and on the results of an internal analysis, the Police Corps Presidium stated it would address this issue via internal regulation.

The ombudsperson noted a decrease in the number of complaints by prisoners but reported an increase in complaints by individuals concerning accessibility and adequacy of health-care provision in prison centers. In one case a prisoner was not provided prescription glasses, resulting in deterioration of his vision. The situation was rectified following the ombudsperson's intervention. The ombudsperson further found undue interference into the privacy of prisoners, who were subjected to physical inspections not fully in line with international standards, as the inspected individuals had to be completely naked.

In 2020 the Police Inspection Service dealt with 172 complaints of excessive use of police force against persons in detention. According to police statistics, 70 percent of the complaints were dismissed, 15 percent saw further disciplinary or criminal proceedings, and the remaining 15 percent of cases were pending.

The December 2020 suicide of former police president Milan Lucansky, who was in detention awaiting trial for accepting bribes, triggered a society-wide discussion on conditions in the country's prisons. Some, including political figures and public commentators, questioned whether the suicide was actually the result of misconduct by prison guards. An ad-hoc, multiparty committee set up by the minister of justice found neither evidence contradicting the officially reported course of events nor any misconduct by prison guards. The committee determined the use of restraints (handcuffs and belt) used when escorting the prisoner complied with the law but was inadequate given his state of health. Referring to the CPT 2018 report, the committee assessed the physical conditions of detention were in line with international standards, although it viewed the use of solitary confinement as problematic. The committee noted it was not possible to reach a conclusion on whether Lucansky's fundamental rights and freedoms were violated due to the relatively short time he spent in custody. Confirming the CPT report's findings, the committee found the opportunities for free-time activities in pretrial custody were limited, even though, similarly to the CPT, it acknowledged the problems faced by a facility with a high rate of detainee turnover as well as the

need to keep detainees from colluding with witnesses. A police investigation continued as of year's end.

Administration: While prisoners were able to file complaints without censorship and a prosecutor or ombudsperson was available to review and act on them, according to a government human rights watchdog, several prisoners claimed they were reluctant to complain about mistreatment due to fear of reprisals or because they believed authorities would not act on their complaints.

Independent Monitoring: The government permitted visits by independent human rights observers and the CPT.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The constitution and the law prohibit arbitrary arrest and detention and provide for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of his or her arrest or detention in court. The government generally observed these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The constitution and law stipulate that authorities may take a person into custody only for explicit reasons and must inform a detainee immediately of the reasons for detention. Persons are apprehended only with warrants issued by a judge or prosecutor based on evidence, and there were no reports of individuals detained without judicial authorization. Suspects in terrorism cases can be held for 96 hours. In other cases a court must grant a hearing to a person accused of a crime within 48 hours (or a maximum of 72 hours in "serious cases," defined as violent crimes, treason, or other crimes carrying a sentence of at least eight years' imprisonment) and either release or remand the individual into custody.

A bail system exists but was rarely used. The law gives detainees the right to consult an attorney immediately after authorities submit charges, and authorities must inform them of this right. The law provides counsel to indigent detainees free of charge. This right, however, was not fully respected in practice, and authorities did not systematically inform detainees of their right to access a lawyer or right to an ex officio lawyer free of charge. The law allows attorneys to visit detainees as frequently as necessary and allows two-hour monthly family visits upon request.

There were no reports of suspects detained incommunicado or held under house arrest.

Pretrial Detention: An amendment to the criminal procedure code, in force from August, introduced changes to collusive custody, the strictest type of pretrial detention designed to prevent defendants from tampering with evidence and influencing witnesses. The law shortens the duration of collusive custody from seven to five months and strengthens the rights of detainees by raising the evidentiary bar for implementation of collusive custody. These changes considered the CPT's recommendations.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution and law provide for an independent judiciary, and the government generally respected judicial independence and impartiality. Alleged corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of integrity and accountability undermined public trust in the judicial system. According to the European Commission's 2021 *EU Justice Scoreboard* report, only 28 percent of Slovak respondents rated the independence of courts and judges as "very good" or "fairly good."

Courts employed a computerized system for random case assignment to increase fairness and transparency. There were reports, however, that the system was subject to manipulation in the past. Leaked mobile telephone communications of businessman Marian Kocner, who was accused of ordering the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, highlighted continuing corruption in the justice system, including the judiciary. Allegations of bribery in exchange for manipulated court decisions and personal influencing of judges were subjects of a continuing police investigation. As of December, 18 sitting or former judges were subject to criminal proceedings, two judges concluded plea agreements, and several judges had resigned from their office or were temporarily suspended from their function because of criminal prosecution.

On January 1, a new constitutional law entered into force as a part of a comprehensive judicial reform addressing these allegations. The law was aimed at increasing the efficiency, integrity, and trustworthiness of the justice system. In particular the law reforms the composition of the Constitutional Court and the

Judicial Council, adds a new level of scrutiny of judges' asset declarations and competence, introduces a retirement age for judges, and establishes a Supreme Administrative Court to also function as a disciplinary court for judges and other legal professions.

Trial Procedures

The constitution and law provide for the right to a fair and public trial without undue delay, and an independent judiciary generally enforced this right. Investigations into judicial corruption, including individual testimonies of former judges, showed that in individual cases, judges failed to act impartially and violated basic principles for conducting fair trials.

Defendants enjoy a presumption of innocence, and a person found guilty by a court does not serve a sentence or pay a fine until a final decision on his or her appeal has been reached. Persons charged with criminal offenses have the right to be informed promptly of the charges against them with free interpretation as necessary. Defendants have the right to adequate time and facilities to prepare a defense, to be present at their trial, to consult in a timely manner with an attorney (at government expense if indigent), and to obtain free interpretation as necessary from the moment of being charged through all appeals. They may confront prosecution and plaintiff witnesses and may present witnesses and evidence on their behalf. Defendants have the right to refuse self-incrimination and may appeal adverse judgments. The law allows plea bargaining, which was often applied in practice.

Unpredictability of court decisions and inefficiency remained major problems in the country's judiciary, leading to long trials, which in civil cases discouraged individuals from filing suit. Cases involving violation of the right to trial without undue delay continued to dominate the Constitutional Court agenda, and several groups' cases have been examined by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR)

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were no reports of political prisoners or detainees.

Civil Judicial Procedures and Remedies

Citizens had unrestricted access to courts to file lawsuits in civil matters, including human rights violations. Courts that hear civil cases, as with criminal courts, were subject to delays. Public trust in the judiciary continued to be low, with European Union surveys measuring it at 28 percent for the general public and 30 percent for the business community. According to the surveys, the public perceived corruption as the judiciary's most urgent problem, followed by delays in proceedings.

Administrative remedies were available in certain cases. The Slovak National Center for Human Rights, a government-supported but independent body, has the authority to provide mediation for cases of discrimination and to represent claimants in court. While human rights organizations criticized the center for lack of activity and ineffectiveness, its reputation improved under new leadership. Individuals and organizations may appeal domestic court decisions on alleged abuses of human rights to the ECHR.

Property Seizure and Restitution

Rent-control regulations for apartment owners whose property was restituted after the fall of the communist regime remained a problem. The state has regulated rents in these properties at below-market rates since 1992. Although authorities took legislative steps to eliminate the discriminatory treatment of the owners, according to the ECHR, property owners should receive specific and clearly regulated compensatory remedies.

The ombudsperson reported excessive delays in numerous land property restitution proceedings that remained unresolved since the fall of the communist regime. In 2018 the ombudsperson presented to parliament a special report that listed 9,198 unresolved cases. In subsequent reports the ombudsperson pointed to the long-term inactivity of the Slovak Land Fund, an office administering state-owned land and real estate under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture, that resulted in individual violations of property rights as well as the right to a hearing without undue delay in restitution and compensation proceedings. Inadequate processes, lack of staff, and insufficient training remained problems, as was corruption. A

corruption probe into the fund's activities that led to the resignation of the former agriculture minister continued, and several former fund officials were in custody, including two of its former heads, one of whom plead guilty to accepting bribes.

The country endorsed the Terezin Declaration on Holocaust Era Assets and Related Issues. The government has laws and mechanisms in place, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy groups reported the government broadly complied with the declaration and made progress on resolution of Holocaust-era claims, including for foreign citizens.

For information regarding Holocaust-era property restitution and related issues, please see the Department of State's *Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act report to Congress*, released publicly in July 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/reports/just-act-report-to-congress/>.

f. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution and law prohibit such actions, and police must present a warrant before conducting a search or within 24 hours afterwards. There were reports the government failed to respect these prohibitions in some cases. In one example proceedings remained pending against the commanding officer of a 2015 police raid in the Romani community in Vrbnica, which included house-to-house searches without warrants and complaints of excessive use of police force.

The continuing investigation into violations related to the 2018 murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée involved allegations of illegal information collection on journalists and their family members by law enforcement bodies (see section 2.a.).

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media

The constitution and law provide for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, and the government generally respected this

right. An independent media, a functioning judiciary, and a functioning democratic political system combined to promote freedom of expression, including for members of the media.

Freedom of Expression: The law prohibits the defamation of nationalities and race, which is punishable by up to three years in prison, and denial of the Holocaust and crimes committed by the fascist and communist regimes, which carry a prison sentence of six months to three years.

Freedom of Expression for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: The prohibitions against defamation of nationalities and denial of the Holocaust and crimes committed by the fascist and communist regimes also applied to the print and broadcast media, the publication of books, and online newspapers and journals. According to media organizations, criminal libel provisions restrict freedom of expression, including freedom of media. In one instance criminal court proceedings were pending against a journalist who was sentenced for libel after he published a 2015 article concerning alleged corruption by former speaker of parliament Jaroslav Paska involving his health-care business.

In 2019 a Bratislava district court ordered former presidential candidate Martin Dano to withdraw his online videos targeting investigative journalist and anticorruption NGO director Zuzana Petkova. The court ruled Dano's videos incited hatred and defamed Petkova and other investigative journalists. Petkova informed media outlets that Dano had not complied with the court decision to withdraw his videos and social media posts, an enforcement procedure failed as well, and he rejected a settlement. Dano went on to publicly share Petkova's personal data and incited his fans to share the disputed social media content. This prompted Petkova to file a criminal complaint, and in October the prosecutor indicted Dano for unauthorized manipulation of personal data, publicly inciting a criminal offense, and making a public appeal to large-scale noncompliance with an important duty prescribed by law. Criminal proceedings were pending.

Separately, in 2019 an investigator pressed charges against Dano and his YouTube partner, Rudolf Vasky, for hooliganism after they allegedly incited violence against several political, judicial, and media personalities. In January 2020 a Bratislava district court issued a similar ruling against Dano and ordered him to

remove his online videos targeting journalist Monika Todova. Criminal proceedings were pending as of August. In October Dano was also accused of hooliganism for verbally attacking two well-known media moderators in his video.

Most media are privately owned or funded from private sources. Radio and Television Slovakia (RTVS) and the TASR news agency received state funding for specific programming. Observers were critical of RTVS' nontransparent financial management, and its independence had been questioned in recent years. In April an RTVS journalist was dismissed, allegedly after she criticized a vaccination-related television report she considered inaccurate. In September the Council for Broadcasting and Retransmission, a national regulatory authority, concluded that the report had violated the law since RTVS did not provide for objectivity and impartiality of the program. Her dismissal was condemned by Reporters Without Borders, and she decided to sue RTVS.

Observers expressed concern regarding the increasing consolidation of media ownership and its potential long-term threat to press freedom. NGOs reported most of the country's private media outlets, including television stations and print publications, were controlled by relatively few financial conglomerates or wealthy individuals.

In September three investigative media outlets were not permitted to attend a press conference by the prosecutor general to explain a decision that had generated controversy. The Prosecutor General's Office cited limited space and COVID-19 regulations. Media asserted that the exclusion of the outlets contradicted prior practices of the office. The prosecutor general's decision was condemned by Reporters without Borders and the International Press Institute.

Violence and Harassment: In 2018 investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kusnirova, were killed in their home. Kuciak regularly reported on allegations of high-level corruption and documented tax-fraud schemes. In 2019 authorities arrested and indicted four suspects for their murder, including businessman Marian Kocner, who was charged with ordering the murder. In January the Specialized Criminal Court sentenced Zoltan Andrusko and in April sentenced Miroslav Marcek to prison for terms of 20 and 23 years, respectively, for their involvement in the murders. In 2020 the Specialized Criminal Court

acquitted both Marian Kocner and indicted collaborator Alena Zsuzsova of ordering the murder, citing a lack of evidence. The court sentenced Tomas Szabo to 25 years in prison as an accessory to the murder. The prosecutor appealed the acquittals to the Supreme Court, which returned the verdict to the lower court in June for reconsideration. As of December the case was pending review by the lower court.

In September former prime minister Robert Fico announced he was filing a criminal complaint with police to verify the origin of property belonging to investigative journalist Monika Todova, a move media watchdogs interpreted as an attempt to silence or intimidate a journalist. It was unclear whether he filed the complaint, but a court ordered a website to remove a report making similar allegations, determining the story was false.

In 2020 an investigative journalist reporting on sensitive cases at news outlet *Aktuality.sk* found a bullet in his mailbox. In January a well-known journalist reported that she had been followed by unknown individuals for several days. In both cases investigations continued as of year's end. The investigation into the Kuciak murder led to allegations that Kocner and his collaborators, led by his close friend and former counterintelligence director Peter Toth, conducted surveillance of selected investigative journalists, allegedly with the assistance of law enforcement. According to media reports, the investigation revealed that police representatives illegally accessed government databases to collect information on journalists and their family members. Information collected through surveillance and from state databases was allegedly used to intimidate individual journalists. In 2020 the former chief of the Financial Intelligence Unit, Pavol Vorobjov, was accused of unlawfully accessing police databases as well as of supporting a criminal group and abuse of power in a different criminal case. He cooperated with police, pleaded guilty, and as of December his plea bargain was underway. Investigations into surveillance and intimidation cases involving unlawfully collected personal data of 140 individuals, including 28 journalists, were pending (see section 4, Corruption).

In September police pressed charges of compromising confidential information against editor Konstantin Cikovsky and journalist Monika Todova. The charges, pressed just before the end of the three-year statute of limitations, were based on a

complaint filed by Peter Toth due to newspaper *Dennik N*'s 2018 article that allegedly revealed his identity as a protected cooperating witness in the Kuciak murder case. The charges against the two journalists were heavily criticized by public officials and civil society, who viewed them as an attempt to silence investigative journalists. The following day the prosecutor dropped the charges as “unlawful, unsubstantiated, and arbitrary.”

Libel/Slander Laws: Libel and slander are treated as criminal offenses. Media organizations criticized a criminal libel provision in the criminal code as restricting freedom of expression.

Financial elites targeted the press in several civil defamation lawsuits, which often required the press to pay large sums of money in penalties or legal costs. The International Press Institute and other observers expressed concern that this financial risk and the administrative burden of constantly contesting lawsuits could lead to media self-censorship.

Internet Freedom

The government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, and there were no credible reports the government monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority. Police, however, monitored websites containing hate speech and attempted to arrest or fine the authors.

Academic Freedom and Cultural Events

There were no government restrictions on academic freedom or cultural events.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution and law provide for freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, and the government generally respected these rights.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The constitution and the law provide for freedom of internal movement, foreign travel, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights.

The government continued to implement restrictions on the freedom of movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In October 2020 the government introduced a state of emergency, during which a curfew, a ban on public assembly, and internal travel restrictions were in place until May. The government reinstated the state of emergency, coupled with restrictions on freedom of movement and public assembly, in November. Citizens arriving from abroad were subject to compulsory isolation throughout that period unless exempted or fully vaccinated, although due to the spread of the Omicron variant, as of December 1, persons arriving from specific countries were required to undergo a mandatory two-week quarantine, regardless of vaccination status. From March until May, residents were not permitted to leave the country for tourism and leisure purposes. The government continued its practice of sealing off entire marginalized Romani settlements under quarantine for COVID-19 in December 2020 and February.

Human rights activists and the ombudsperson continued to question whether the extraordinary measures and restrictions introduced to contain the spread of COVID-19, particularly the 14-day quarantine of arrivals from abroad in state-run facilities in 2020 and the quarantining of Romani settlements, were proportionate, had a valid legal basis, or violated the constitution. By April the Constitutional Court had received more than 80 complaints, many concerning the compulsory state quarantine, but dismissed most on the grounds that all legal remedies had not been exhausted by the complainants. On December 1, the Constitutional Court ruled against a motion submitted by the General Prosecutor that challenged the power of the Public Health Authority to issue antipandemic measures as mere decrees. In a separate ruling on December 8, however, the court upheld a complaint submitted by the ombudsperson in February, ruling that broad competences of the Health Ministry and the Public Health Authority to adopt antipandemic measures restricting fundamental rights and freedoms without clearly defined limitations were unconstitutional. In the same verdict, the court also declared that mandatory quarantines in state-run facilities in 2020 were a

deprivation of liberty. In July the Constitutional Court, acting on complaints of discrimination by unvaccinated persons, ruled that persons who received only one dose of the vaccine should not be exempted from the compulsory quarantine after their return to the country.

e. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons

Not applicable.

f. Protection of Refugees

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and contracted with a humanitarian organization to assist in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law provides for the granting of asylum or refugee status, and the government has an established system for providing some protection to refugees. Some civil society organizations criticized the Migration Office for applying a restrictive asylum policy and granting asylum only in a very limited number of cases.

NGOs reported asylum seekers had only limited access to qualified, independent legal advice. The contract for legal assistance to asylum seekers did not cover asylum seekers in detention, so these persons could access free legal assistance only in the second, appellate-level hearing on their asylum application process. Migration Office staff allegedly endeavored to provide legal advice to some asylum applicants, even though they were also interviewing the asylum seekers and adjudicating their asylum applications.

There was no independent monitoring by local NGOs of access to asylum procedures on the country's borders and only limited monitoring of access to asylum by UNHCR.

Safe Country of Origin/Transit: The country denied asylum to applicants from a safe country of origin or transit. The law requires authorities to ensure the well-being of individual asylum seekers is not threatened if deported to a non-EU "safe

country.” Some observers criticized the Bureau of Border and Alien Police for lacking the information necessary to determine whether a country would be safe for persons facing deportation there.

Freedom of Movement: NGOs reported that the Bureau of Border and Alien Police unnecessarily detained migrants on badly founded or arbitrary detention orders, including asylum seekers who police believed made false asylum claims, and that police failed adequately to use alternatives to detention, such as supervised release or financial bonds. NGOs reported it was routine practice to issue detention orders and place asylum seekers with children in the immigration detention center in Secovce, where they often faced inadequate living conditions.

Access to Basic Services: NGOs reported schools generally did not make use of available government support for language and integration assistance for foreign students.

Human rights organizations stated that integration of approved asylum seekers in the country was hampered by the absence of a comprehensive government-funded and -operated integration program. These services had to be provided by NGOs and were funded through a patchwork of domestic and international sources. In August the government began providing access to COVID-19 vaccinations to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

Human rights organizations reported that asylum seekers placed in immigration detention did not have adequate access to quality health care, contributing to the spread of contagious diseases in detention facilities.

Durable Solutions: The Migration Office accommodated refugees processed at the UNHCR emergency transit center in Humenne for permanent resettlement to a third country. The refugees were moved to Slovakia from other countries due to security and humanitarian concerns. The center was able to accommodate up to 250 refugees at a time but operated at low occupancy levels throughout the year.

Temporary Protection: The government provided temporary “subsidiary protection” to individuals who might not qualify as refugees but could not return to their home countries, and as of November granted it to 11 persons. Subsidiary protection is initially granted for one year, with possible two-year extensions.

NGOs asserted this approach created uncertainty regarding the individual's status in the country and significantly hindered employment and overall integration prospects. There were reports persons granted subsidiary protection had only limited access to health care. The Ministry of Interior issued health coverage documentation directly to persons with subsidiary protection without clear explanation of benefits.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

The constitution and the law provide citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage.

Elections and Political Participation

Recent Elections: Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe considered parliamentary elections held in 2020 as well as presidential elections held in 2019 to have been free and fair.

Participation of Women and Members of Minority Groups: No laws limit the participation of women and members of minority groups in the political process, and they have participated. In 2019 the country elected its first female president. Women constituted slightly less than 21 percent of the parliament elected in the 2020 elections, a slight increase compared with the previous election period. Three women held seats in a 16-member cabinet.

While there were small but increasing numbers of Romani mayors and members of local councils, few Roma were in communal, provincial, and national elective bodies. In 2020 three Romani candidates were elected to parliament, the highest number in the country's history.

The Hungarian minority, the largest in the country, was proportionately present at the local and regional levels and participated actively in the political process. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, none of the ethnic-Hungarian parties crossed the threshold to enter parliament for the first time since the country's independence in 1993.

Persons with disabilities rarely sought elected public office and were underrepresented in the political process at the local and national level. In 2016 for the first time ever a wheelchair user was elected to parliament, and one wheelchair user had served as a member of parliament since 2020. Politicians, public officials, or persons seeking elected office rarely identified openly as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+).

Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, and the government generally implemented the law effectively. There were isolated reports of government corruption during the year.

The government prioritized transparency and accountability in the public sector. The disclosure of all contracts concluded by public authorities allowed for public scrutiny and helped bring unlawful conduct in public procurement to light. Beneficial owners of companies authorized to do business with the state are published by the Register of Public Sector Partners. Observers viewed these provisions as demonstrations of above-standard transparency laws in the country.

Rule of law, the fight against corruption, and transparency were among the government's top priorities, and there was notable progress during the year in terms of both reform efforts and efforts to hold corrupt actors to account. In August a newly created national institution for the management of seized assets began operation. In February parliament selected the head of a newly created Whistleblower Protection Office. While corruption had long been perceived as widespread, 39 percent of Slovak respondents indicated a decrease in their perceptions of the level of corruption over the previous year in the *Global Corruption Barometer-EU 2021* issued by Transparency International.

Corruption: During the year investigative journalists and NGOs documented cases of well-connected businesspersons siphoning off state finances in previous years through tax fraud, manipulated public procurements, or frauds related to agricultural subsidies. These investigations resulted in the prosecution of former high-profile officials, often nominees of the former government, notably at the

Financial Administration (the tax and customs authority) or the Agriculture Ministry organizations administering subsidies, as well as entrepreneurs. Several cooperating defendants supported allegations of a corruption “system” and also testified regarding the involvement of political figures in corruption cases.

In 2020 police initiated a series of interconnected, high-level, and unprecedented corruption investigations that continued throughout 2021, leading to the arrest of more than 50 current and former officials as well as notable members of the business community. These included the former prosecutor general, former special prosecutor, former police president, former vice president of the Supreme Court, former deputy minister of justice, former deputy minister of finance, and some of the wealthiest Slovak entrepreneurs. In September a court found the former head of the Special Prosecution Service, Dusan Kovacik, guilty of accepting bribes, supporting an organized criminal group, and covering up the attempted murder of a police officer. An appeal was pending. Other cases remained underway, although several charged individuals pleaded guilty, notably the former head of the Police Inspection Service, who pleaded guilty to accepting bribes and abuse of power.

Investigations into judicial corruption widened as well, largely based on encrypted telephone conversations of several judges and prosecutors with convicted criminal Marian Kocner, accused also of masterminding the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée. As of November multiple investigations into judicial corruption were pending, with some judges confessing to being part of a corruption scheme and some remanded into custody. Two judges involved in a regional corruption scheme received suspended sentences after pleading guilty to charges against them.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

A variety of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases.

Throughout the year some political figures made derogatory remarks toward

minorities, including LGBTQI+ persons. In May Robert Fico, a member of parliament and chair of the opposition Smer-SD party criticized the justice minister during a parliamentary session for awarding grants to NGOs working on LGBTQI+ issues, accusing her of giving priority to the “physical needs of homosexuals” over the spiritual needs of the Slovak nation.

Several representatives of both the coalition and opposition parties criticized attempts by civil society and the ombudsperson to raise awareness of LGBTQI+ issues and human rights for Roma. In May parliament refused to formally recognize the ombudsperson’s annual report. Several members of parliament criticized the ombudsperson on the floor of parliament for her alleged partiality for purportedly defending the rights of the Roma while not standing up for the rights of alleged victims of violence by Roma.

Government Human Rights Bodies: The justice minister headed the Government Council on Human Rights and National Minorities, an advisory body including government officials and civil society representatives.

Maria Patakyova headed the Office of the Public Defender of Rights (ombudsperson) and submitted an annual report on human rights problems to parliament. Human rights activists credited Patakyova with raising the profile of fundamental rights problems in the country, despite criticism, obstruction, and a lack of interest from politicians.

Parliament has a 13-member Human Rights and National Minorities Committee that held regular sessions during the year. The committee remained without a chairperson due to disputes between the opposition and the ruling coalition and was left with one vice chair after another vice chair was appointed in May to head a different parliamentary committee. While the committee passed a resolution in July in support of addressing the issue of involuntarily sterilized women, NGOs consistently criticized the committee for failing to address serious human rights concerns as well as the absenteeism of some of its members.

The Slovak National Center for Human Rights acts as the country’s national human rights institution and as the dedicated equality body but was in the past criticized for inactivity by NGOs and members of the Government Council on

Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality. Between the end of 2019 and September 2020, the institution operated without an officially appointed director after the management board failed on multiple occasions to elect new leadership. In 2020 the board elected Silvia Porubanova, a sociologist and expert on gender equality, as new center director. Under her leadership the center became more outspoken and visible, including on discrimination, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ issues. In celebration of Bratislava Pride Month in July, the center for the first time flew a rainbow flag.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law prohibits rape and sexual violence, which carry a penalty of five to 25 years in prison. The law does not specifically define spousal rape, but the criminal code covers spousal rape and spousal sexual violence under the crime of rape and sexual violence. NGOs and rape victims criticized police for sometimes failing to enforce the law effectively and for often failing to communicate appropriately with rape victims. Rape and domestic violence victims had access to shelters and counseling offered by NGOs and government-funded programs. NGO service providers complained that authorities provided only a small portion of necessary funding, forcing many centers to close or raise additional resources from private and international donors.

Domestic violence against women is punishable by three to eight years' imprisonment. Domestic violence was widespread, and activists claimed official statistics failed to capture the magnitude of the problem. NGOs also asserted the government did not enforce the law effectively. Experts complained there were no written procedures for referring battered women to counselling centers or shelters and no services for batterers. The lack of affordable public housing or rent-controlled housing often forced victims to return to abusive households.

According to a study commissioned by IKEA in cooperation with the NGO Fenestra published in November, 77 percent of Slovak respondents believed that violence in partnerships was widespread and required more attention, and more than half knew someone who experienced violence in an intimate partner

relationship. At the same time, almost 25 percent believed the problem was exaggerated, 48 percent agreed that victims were at least partially responsible for the violence in their partnerships, and 42 percent stated that many women only accused their partners of violence out of revenge.

In April the government allocated three million euros (\$3.5 million) to support domestic violence shelters and fund counseling services as a temporary measure to cover a funding gap due to delays in the availability of European Economic Area grants – the major source of funding for shelter homes in the country. An amendment to the law on victims of criminal acts entered into force in July, introducing measures aimed at strengthening rights and protection of victims of criminal acts, including provision of legal assistance to victims seeking restraining orders and extending restraint distances from 33 to 164 feet. Police also became responsible for notifying victims of the termination of restraining orders before informing the offenders. To prevent further victimization, the amendment also expanded the list of victims eligible for compensation, who were to be paid by the state during criminal proceedings. The law also established a network of intervention centers, to become operational as of November, to ensure better coordination between centers providing legal and counseling support to domestic violence survivors and law enforcement bodies, including creating referral procedures for police and providing long-term funding for centers to ensure their sustainability and availability.

In April the General Prosecution Service reported that the incidence of domestic violence increased rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on movement, with the number of recorded cases in 2020 increasing by 30 percent compared with 2019. Domestic violence prosecutions increased 20 percent in 2020 compared with 2019. The severity of domestic violence incidents increased, and the number of women killed by their partners increased by 71 percent in 2020 compared with 2019, the highest overall number since 2010.

The number of calls to a national helpline for women experiencing domestic violence increased by 49 percent in 2020 compared with 2019. NGOs providing victim care services confirmed the deteriorating trend, and the Institute for Labor and Family Research noted that victims had difficulty accessing assistance in January, when there were no exceptions for threats to life and health included in

the strict COVID-19 curfew mandate. According to the institute, however, antipandemic measures during the year did not significantly impact the functioning and availability of shelter homes and emergency housing for women. Despite concerns from civil society organizations, in November the government reintroduced pandemic-related restrictions to the freedom of movement that again did not provide adequate exemptions allowing victims of domestic violence to leave their households despite an active curfew.

In July 2020 police began testing a new smartphone application that would allow victims to secretly place distress calls to them. As of December the application was still not fully operational.

Sexual Harassment: The law defines sexual harassment as unlawful discrimination, which is subject to civil penalties. Victims usually avoided legal action due to fear of reprisal, lengthy court proceedings, and lack of accessible legal services. A coordination center for gender-based and domestic violence under the Labor, Social Affairs, and Family Ministry implements and coordinates countrywide policies to prevent and eliminate violence against women, including sexual harassment, and it also coordinates education and training efforts for the public and professionals. The government operated a 24/7 hotline for women subjected to violence.

Civil society organizations criticized police for poor handling of cases of sexual harassment. In June a group of men allegedly sexually harassed two women in Bratislava, making lewd comments and chasing them, with one man allegedly touching one of the women. The victims reported the incident to police but complained that the police officers were unprofessional, allegedly downplaying the incident by asking speculative questions that doubted and humiliated the victims.

Reproductive Rights: There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities involving Romani or other women, although human rights organizations maintained that medical personnel often asked Romani women to sign consent forms for these procedures without fully explaining their meaning or providing them in the women's language.

Authorities continued requiring persons seeking a legally recognized sex change to

undergo permanent sterilization, effectively ending their ability to reproduce.

Human rights organizations criticized the quality and practices used in childbirth care services, and NGOs reported that Romani women, especially from marginalized communities in the eastern region of the country, at times faced reproductive health-care discrimination, segregation, verbal and physical violence, and a general lack of information on reproductive health. According to a 2018 government report, infant mortality in the Romani population was almost three times higher than the national rate, while a 2014 study by the Slovak Academy of Sciences (the most recent available) reported there was a high rate of adolescent pregnancies among women from Romani communities, with approximately 25 percent of them bearing a first child by the age of 18. In comparison the Ministry of Health reported that women under 18 made up 4.2 percent of all first pregnancies in 2019.

In July, on the advice of the ombudsperson and after repeated calls by civil society and international organizations, parliament's Human Rights and National Minorities Committee passed a resolution requesting a systemic resolution of the issue of involuntary sterilizations of predominantly Romani women, expressing support for adoption of a restitution scheme and calling for and calling for a government apology. Two victims of involuntary sterilization gave testimony to committee members during the session. Subsequently, on November 24, the government issued a formal apology to female victims of involuntary sterilizations and condemned the violations of their human rights. The government acknowledged that the "unacceptable" practice, targeting primarily Roma women from marginalized communities, occurred not only under the communist regime, but as late as early 2000s, when the women were often pressured into providing their consent without adequate understanding of the sterilization's consequences or sufficient time to consider the decision. The government also established an expert working group to set up a system to identify and compensate the women.

In 2020 the regional court in Kosice upheld a lower court ruling that awarded compensation to an illegally sterilized Romani woman. The woman was sterilized without informed consent in 1999 in Krompachy Hospital in the eastern region during the birth of her second child by Caesarean section. She was not informed about the sterilization procedure by hospital staff and did not give informed

consent to the intervention. She became aware that she had been sterilized only after the procedure. The ensuing court case continued for more than 15 years.

While contraception was widely available, NGOs reported that a lack of reimbursement from the national health system (unless used for health-related reasons) constituted a significant barrier to access, especially for young and vulnerable populations.

During the year NGOs expressed concerns regarding some practices imposed on women in childbirth, including medically unjustified separations of mothers and newborn babies, refusal to allow a companion to be present at birth, and reduced quality of health care to and undignified treatment of mothers who tested positive for COVID-19 due to measures to respond to the pandemic. In May the ombudsperson released a survey on childbirth care, covering a period from 2016 to 2020 and based on a sample of almost 3,200 women. It showed problems with lack of informed consent in 55 percent of cases and inadequate privacy in 26 percent of cases. In November the Health Ministry issued unified standards for obstetrical care that the ombudsperson lauded for also including rules concerning birth companions, informed consent, right to privacy, or performance of episiotomy.

The country does not have a national sexual and reproductive health program to provide dedicated access to sexual and reproductive health services for survivors of sexual violence. Victims approached their general practitioners, emergency rooms, or, less frequently, their gynecologists. Survivors generally had access to emergency over-the-counter contraception. The government ran a 24/7 national multilanguage helpline for women experiencing violence, and the Coordinating Methodical Center for Prevention of Violence against Women offered emergency help to victims of sexual violence.

Discrimination: The law provides the same legal status for women as for men. Discrimination against women remained a problem, particularly in the labor market, where women were less likely to be offered employment than men with equal qualifications and faced a 21 percent gender pay gap.

In April the government approved a new gender equality strategy for 2021 to 2027

along with an accompanying action plan, which focuses on addressing key issues affecting women's rights in the areas of dignity and bodily integrity, family and work life, education, employment, and political and economic participation.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The constitution guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms to everyone regardless of sex, race, color, language, belief or religion, political affiliation, or other conviction, national or social origin, nationality or ethnic origin, property, descent, or any other status, and it allows no person to be discriminated against or favored on any of these grounds. An antidiscrimination law forbids unequal treatment on the grounds of one's race or belonging to a national or ethnic group, which is subject to civil penalties. The criminal code defines "extremist" crimes such as founding, supporting, and expressing sympathy toward movements aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms; producing or disseminating "extremist" materials; defamation of a nation, race, and belief; or incitement to national, racial, or ethnic hatred. Crimes committed with a special motive, which includes hatred against a group or individuals for their actual or alleged race, nationality, or ethnic affiliation, are punished with stiffer sentences. While experts noted increased investigation and prosecution of "extremist" crimes, they recognized that public authorities often failed to identify a special aggravating motive. Civil society organizations also criticized the government for ineffective enforcement of antidiscrimination legislation, especially concerning widespread discriminatory practices against the Roma population.

Segregation and societal discrimination against Roma and individuals of non-European ethnicity was common. A 2019 *Atlas of Roma Communities* study by the Ministry of Interior, the most recent available, found that as much as 49 percent of the Romani population resided in marginalized communities. This represented a slight decrease compared with the previous iteration of the study conducted by the UN Development Program in 2013, which estimated that 53 percent of Roma resided in settlements. According to the same study, only 19 percent of the Romani minority lived integrated among the majority population. The study identified 180 segregated rural settlements located outside municipalities and 418 communities on the outskirts of municipalities. The study found that 61 percent of inhabitants in the 100 largest concentrations of Romani citizens had access to

drinking water, compared with 48 percent in 2013.

There were reports of harassment of members of ethnic minorities during the year and reports of violence and excessive use of force by members of the police against Romani citizens. Experts noted that most cases of police violence were likely not reported by the Roma due to fear and lack of trust and highlighted that inadequate police investigation of such cases was a persistent problem.

In May the public broadcaster reported that police officers in Svidnik allegedly beat two Romani men who were suspected of a petty cash robbery. According to one of the victims, the police officers took him to the local police station for interrogation and proceeded to beat him in the interrogation room, first hitting his head and then beating his bare feet while he was forced to kneel on a chair completely naked. The other man stated that police hit his head and feet several times while he was leaning against a wall. The case was investigated by the Police Inspection Service and was pending as of December.

In May and June, the Kosice District Court acquitted five Roma charged with making false allegations against police officers in connection with the investigation of the 2013 police raid on a Romani community in Moldava nad Bodvou. The acquittals came after the prosecutor of the Kosice Regional Prosecutor's Service dropped charges against five of six defendants in the case, a decision observers attributed to a September 2020 verdict of the ECHR regarding a complaint submitted by two of the defendants. The ECHR identified human rights violations by the authorities and awarded the two raid victims financial compensation to be paid by the government. A Kosice District Court judge ruled on December 9 to drop prosecution of the final, sixth, Roma victim of the raid who faced false testimony and perjury charges, citing the European Human Rights Convention as well as the ECHR decision as grounds for the verdict. The prosecutor appealed the ruling, and the case was pending a decision by the Kosice Regional Court as of December.

In response to the acquittals, in June the government issued a formal apology to the victims of the police raid, expressing regret over the authorities' actions and subsequent criminalization of the victims. Following repeated calls by civil society and the ombudsperson, in July the police president mandated reintroduction

of compulsory video recordings during police raids.

In 2020 the Kosice District Court, in its third and binding ruling in the case, confirmed a lower court ruling that acquitted all of the police officers accused in a 2009 case of police abuse against a group of six Romani boys between the ages of 11 and 15. During the incident the officers allegedly brought the boys to the police station and forced them to strip, slap each other, and carry out their orders and also threatened them with a loaded weapon and police dogs. Some of the actions were recorded on a smartphone and made public. The ECHR ruled in April on a related incident that preceded the alleged beatings that state authorities did not sufficiently investigate the police violence allegations.

In 2020 a police officer allegedly beat a group of five Romani children trying to leave a marginalized Romani settlement that was placed under quarantine due to a COVID-19 outbreak in the community. According to the Union of Roma in Slovakia, the officer first threatened the children with a gun and then beat them using batons, causing bruises and other injuries. The ombudsperson, the government plenipotentiary for Romani communities, and the Slovak National Center for Human Rights condemned the incident and called for a thorough investigation. The Ministry of Interior's inspection service launched an investigation into possible abuse of power by a public official. The investigation was pending as of December.

Police generally responded quickly to gatherings targeting the Romani community and prevented crowds from entering Romani communities or inciting confrontations.

There were instances of public officials at every level defaming minorities and making derogatory comments about Roma. In July the former prime minister and chair of the opposition Smer party, Robert Fico, denounced the financial incentives introduced by the government to encourage vaccination against COVID-19, alleging they would benefit mostly Roma and stating, "gypsies in gypsy settlements are already rubbing their hands."

In September Pope Francis visited the Lunik IX housing estate in Kosice, home to the largest Romani population in the country, estimated at more than 4,000, with a

significant proportion of inhabitants facing poverty and poor living conditions. The visit precipitated a wave of racist commentary on social media targeting the Romani communities living at Lunik IX.

During the October 13 International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Anti-Semitism in Malmo, Sweden, Prime Minister Heger committed the government to include Roma history in educational and training materials and to make active use of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's recommendations on teaching about the Roma Holocaust.

In August Prime Minister Heger, Interior Minister Roman Mikulec, Public Defender of Rights Maria Patakyova, and other government officials attended a Romani Holocaust remembrance ceremony in Banska Bystrica. Other leaders, including President Caputova, Justice Minister Maria Kolikova, and Foreign Minister Ivan Korcok, commemorated the Roma Holocaust separately as well, with President Caputova calling on "every citizen to reduce the space for hatred so that ethnically motivated humiliation and physical and verbal attacks do not happen." In April, on International Roma Day, President Caputova hosted a group of Roma medical and social workers, volunteers, educators, and activists in recognition of their work on the frontlines of the fight against COVID-19.

In 2020 the Slovak Academy of Sciences released a representative survey of majority attitudes toward Romani citizens. When examining stereotypes about Roma, the survey found that most respondents (80 percent) tended to agree with a statement that Roma in the country received undeserved benefits from the social system, and almost two-thirds of respondents tended to identify with openly negative stereotypes of Roma. Only half of the respondents tended to agree with the statements that highlighted the value of Romani culture. The survey also found that respondents identified most with a so-called hostile political discourse, where politicians referred negatively to Romani citizens, particularly regarding work habits and crime rates in Romani communities.

Widespread discrimination against Roma continued in employment, education, health care, housing, loan practices, restaurants, hair salons, religious services, and public transportation.

During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government continued the controversial practice of blanket quarantining of entire marginalized Romani settlements to stop the spread of the disease. Based on results of COVID-19 testing, regional public health offices ordered a mandatory full-area quarantine in one settlement in December 2020 and two settlements in February, with armed police and military guards stationed at the entrances to the settlements. Quarantines lasted up to several weeks, and NGOs reported that residents complained of uncertainty due to absence of clear guidance on the duration and conditions of the quarantine. Authorities reportedly did not isolate persons who tested positive for COVID-19 from other persons in the community. Local authorities provided food and medical supplies to the sealed-off settlements, but the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities reported lack of firewood and access to general and specialized health care while under quarantine. Human rights NGOs reported the quarantines contributed to further stigmatization and anti-Romani prejudice, and that there were reports of increased hate speech against Roma on social media. The ombudsperson continued criticizing the blanket quarantines in Romani communities. In February she requested the prosecutor general review the legality of the quarantines and consider submitting the matter to the Constitutional Court. The prosecutor general forwarded the motion to district prosecutors' offices, which suspended it on the grounds that the quarantines were already over by that time.

Human rights experts also noted that Romani individuals often received harsher penalties for breaching antipandemic measures. In January police issued a 500 euro (\$575) fine to a Rom for crossing a border between the Kosice Okolie and Kosice districts to get firewood, although media reported that the average penalty for violating the COVID-19 restrictions at that time was only 67 euros (\$77). In May prosecutors in the Spisska Nova Ves District dropped charges against an 18-year-old Rom from a marginalized community in Richnava who was facing a two-year prison sentence for stealing 0.26 euros (\$0.30) worth of wood in January during a COVID-19-related state of emergency. The prosecutor deemed the charges by police as illegal and unsubstantiated, citing the negligible damage, the fact that the man was underage at the time of the incident, and taking into account that the man, together with his grandfather, was helping to care for his four siblings.

Local authorities continued to use regulatory obstacles, such as withholding of construction permits, to discourage the legal establishment of Romani settlements. Media reported cases where non-Romani persons tried to prevent Romani customers from buying or renting property in “their” neighborhood.

Members of the Romani minority continued to experience obstacles and discrimination in the access to quality health care. A government report released by the Ministry of Finance in 2019, the most recent data available, estimated life expectancy in the Romani population at 69.6 years, nearly seven years less than the general population, and infant mortality at three times the country average. NGOs reported Romani women faced multiple forms of discrimination in reproductive health care, including segregation in maternity departments, verbal harassment, and mistreatment by medical personnel. The hospitals claimed they grouped persons according to their levels of hygiene and adaptability, not by ethnicity. NGOs continued to express concerns regarding the way medical personnel obtained informed consent from Romani patients, often not fully explaining its meaning or requesting a signature under time pressure.

In April the government adopted a new National Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation by 2030, which NGOs assessed positively, although they noted that the implementation of such documents in the past was often uneven.

The government’s Council on Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality operated a Committee for the Prevention and Elimination of Racism, Xenophobia, Anti-Semitism, and Other Forms of Intolerance. Since 2017 “extremist” crimes fall under the purview of the National Counterterrorism Unit at the National Crime Agency and are prosecuted by the Specialized Prosecution Service at the Specialized Criminal Court. Experts credited these specialized law enforcement and prosecution agencies with an increased number of cases and higher conviction rate for perpetrators of “extremist” crimes as well as for raising the profile of the issue in society.

Children

Birth Registration: Children acquire citizenship by birth to at least one citizen

parent, regardless of where the child is born. Each domestic birth is recorded at the local vital statistics office, including for children born to asylum seekers, stateless persons, and detained migrants.

Education: Romani children from socially excluded communities faced educational discrimination and segregation and were disproportionately enrolled in “special” schools or placed in segregated classrooms within mainstream schools. A government review released by the Ministry of Finance’s analytical unit in 2019 confirmed earlier reporting from the ombudsperson that Romani children received an inferior education compared with their non-Romani peers. The report found a disproportionately high share of Romani children in “special” schools for children with intellectual disabilities (42 percent of all children enrolled) and schools with special classes for Romani children (63 percent). According to the review, only 32 percent of Romani children had received preschool education, compared with 75 percent for the general population, and one-third of Romani children dropped out of the education system before completing elementary school.

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic deepened the educational gap between children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly children from marginalized Romani settlements, and children from more affluent families. According to a study conducted by NGO EduRoma, 70 percent of marginalized Romani children did not participate in distance learning, and 60 percent of them had no contact with their teachers whatsoever because of closure of primary and secondary schools during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, mainly because they did not have access to a computer or the internet. Experts reported similar obstacles during limitations imposed on in-class learning throughout the 2020-21 school year. Educational professionals warned this interruption in the education of children from disadvantaged backgrounds would have lasting impacts on their future educational and career prospects.

There were reports of racial discrimination and inappropriate language being used against members of the Romani minority at all levels of the education system. In 2020 the regional court in Bratislava upheld a 2016 trial court ruling dismissing an antidiscrimination lawsuit against the segregation of Romani children at an elementary school in the town of Stara Lubovna. The court determined that Romani children were not segregated in education even though the school was

ethnically homogenous and attended exclusively by Romani children from a nearby marginalized settlement. The human rights NGO Poradna, which initiated the lawsuit, considered the court's judgment in breach of international human rights law and filed an extraordinary appeal to the Supreme Court that was pending as of December.

In December the government adopted a *Strategy for Inclusive Approach to Education 2030* that included inclusive education, desegregation, and destigmatization in education among its priority areas. While Roma and education experts noted the need for the strategy, they criticized the quality and vagueness of the document and noted lack of implementation of the majority of desegregation measures set out in the pilot action plan for 2021, which was adopted by the government in 2020.

Child Abuse: Domestic abuse carries basic penalties of three to eight years' imprisonment. Child abuse remained a problem according to child advocates. A 2017 government study, the most recent available, indicated that 70 percent of 13- to 15-year-olds had experienced some form of physical, emotional, or sexual violence or parental neglect.

The government continued implementing and annually updating the *National Action Plan for Children* for 2013-22, funded through the government budget. Government bodies provided financial support to crisis centers for abused children and to NGOs that worked on child abuse. The Labor and Social Affairs Office had dedicated departments for overseeing childcare and operated a national coordination body for dealing with violence against children, which collected data, provided information on domestic violence and abuse of minors, helped refer victims to service providers, and operated a national helpline.

Coalition members of parliament and civil society experts criticized the ombudsperson for child rights for her inactivity and failure to protect the best interests of children; there were also allegations of lack of transparency, mismanagement, and nepotism. The ombudsperson's six-year term formally ended in December, but parliament did not appoint her replacement due to disagreements within the ruling coalition.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The legal minimum age for marriage is 18. In exceptional cases, based upon request of one of the marrying couple, a competent court may allow marriage of a person as young as 16 if both parents consent. Law enforcement authorities continued reporting a number of cases of Slovak children of Romani descent being subjected to forced marriage, often by their legal guardians seeking financial benefit. In 2020 three Romani victims of forced marriages were identified, and as of December two such victims were identified. Overall in 2020, girls younger than 18 accounted for half of all identified sex trafficking victims (the youngest victim was 11) as well as half of the victims of forced marriages. Most perpetrators were parents or relatives.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: Rape and sexual violence against a child carry basic penalties of seven to 15 years' imprisonment. The law establishes 15 as the minimum age for consensual sex. The law prohibited sexual exploitation of children, including child sex trafficking and prescribed penalties of four to 10 years' imprisonment. As of November police reported 375 cases of sexual abuse of children younger than 15, compared with 468 cases in 2020 and 518 in 2019. Experts stated that sexual exploitation of children went largely underreported and that convicted perpetrators often received lenient sentences. As of December the police identified nine underage victims of sex trafficking.

The production, distribution, or possession of child pornography is a crime with penalties ranging from two to 20 years' imprisonment. As of November police reported 257 such cases, compared with 403 and 286 cases in 2020 and 2019, respectively, with distribution of child pornography dominating the cases.

Institutionalized Children: Reports published by the ombudsperson during the year found that juvenile offenders at educational rehabilitation centers regularly endured hunger and were subjected to degrading treatment, including compulsory gynecological examinations of girls after their trips outside the facility. The reports also found substandard levels of education at the centers.

In 2020 the prosecution service opened three new criminal investigations and prosecutions related to the scandal-ridden private juvenile rehabilitation facility *Cisty den* (Clean Day), which lost its official accreditation in 2017 after a series of allegations of severe malpractice and misconduct. In 2018 and 2019, courts

convicted a former therapist and cook employed at the facility and sentenced them to a three-year suspended sentence and a five-year prison sentence, respectively, for sexual abuse of underage persons at the facility. In June a court upheld the five-year sentence for a former cook. In 2019 the prosecution service exonerated the former manager of the facility from accusations of battery and assault of a minor but continued investigating him for alleged fraud.

International Child Abductions: The country is a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. See the Department of State's *Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction* at <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/International-Parental-Child-Abduction/for-providers/legal-reports-and-data/reported-cases.html>.

Anti-Semitism

Jewish community leaders estimated, and the 2011 census data indicated, there were 2,000 persons in the Jewish community.

Organized neo-Nazi groups with an estimated 500 active members and several thousand sympathizers occasionally spread anti-Semitic messages. Latent anti-Semitic stereotypes characterizing Jews as greedy or secretly influencing world affairs were widespread, even beyond neo-Nazi groups and their sympathizers. The neo-Nazi party Kotlebovci – Ludova strana Nase Slovensko (Kotleba's – People's Party Our Slovakia, LSNS) received 8 percent of the vote in the 2020 parliamentary elections, securing 17 of 150 seats in parliament. Among the elected representatives for LSNS were several individuals prosecuted or convicted of hate crimes, including party chair Marian Kotleba, who was convicted for giving a charitable donation with Nazi symbolism; Andrej Medvecký, convicted of attacking a foreigner because of race; Stanislav Mizik, acquitted for lack of evidence of posting an anti-Semitic message on his Facebook profile criticizing the president for giving state awards to citizens of Jewish origin; and Milan Mazurek, convicted for anti-Romani statements made in a public radio broadcast, who left LSNS in January.

In 2020 the Specialized Criminal Court approved a plea bargain for Michal Buchta, former LSNS regional chairman and a former leader of the LSNS youth wing,

Ludova mladez (Popular Youth). Buchta was given a three-year suspended sentence and a 600 euro (\$690) fine and ordered to undergo mandatory psychological counseling for distributing extremist materials. He had previously been arrested by the National Criminal Agency in 2018 along with two other individuals, including neo-Nazi singer Jaroslav “Reborn” Pagac. Pagac was convicted by the Specialized Criminal Court in June for producing and distributing clothes and other items bearing extremist symbols and was sentenced to four years in prison.

In April the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of LSNS regional chairman Anton Grno, who in 2020 was found guilty of supporting a movement aimed at suppressing human rights and fundamental freedoms. During a 2018 Supreme Court hearing, Grno shouted the greeting of the World War II-era Slovak fascist state’s paramilitary force. Grno was fined 5,000 euros (\$5,750) and sentenced to six months in prison should he fail to pay the fine. Media outlets reported that Grno’s social media profiles contained several openly racist and anti-Semitic posts.

In October the Supreme Court confirmed a verdict of the Specialized Criminal Court, which in 2019 found Tibor Eliot Rostas, editor in chief of *Zem a vek* magazine, guilty of defamation of race and nation for his anti-Semitic article, “Wedge of Jews Among Slavs.” The court upheld the original sentence of a 4,000 euro (\$4,600) penalty, which Rostas paid in December, thus avoiding a three-month prison sentence. In 2019 both Rostas and the prosecutor appealed the sentence. In the original 2017 article in *Zem a vek*, which local experts labeled a conspiracy magazine, Rostas wrote about centuries-long efforts of Jews to drive wedges among Slavs and destroy their traditions, culture, and values, drawing on selected anti-Semitic quotes of prominent political figures from Slovak history.

While direct denial of the Holocaust was relatively rare, expressions of approval of the World War II-era Slovak fascist state, which deported tens of thousands of Jews, Roma, and others to death camps, occurred frequently. Throughout the year far-right groups commemorated dates associated with the Slovak fascist state and its president, Jozef Tiso, including the LSNS youth wing, which on March 14 published a social media post commemorating creation of the fascist state in 1939. On the same date, LSNS chairman Marian Kotleba posted a Slovak flag on his social media account that experts claimed was an acknowledgement of the Slovak

fascist state anniversary. In December, following an investigation into a case of a street named after the Slovak fascist state president located in a village of Varin, the National Criminal Agency pressed charges against 10 of 11 local councilors for a crime of expressing sympathies with a movement aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms. The charged councilors, one of whom was absent then, refused to vote in favor of changing the name during an August municipal council meeting, citing plans to call a local referendum once police and the courts closed the case. After all 10 councilors objected, the special prosecutor dismissed the charges on grounds that the particular crime cannot be committed by inaction and that “lack of empathy and ignorance of historical facts” do not constitute a crime. In April the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities publicly protested a decision by the city of Ruzomberok to present an award to a historian it claimed was an advocate of the wartime Slovak state who relativized the Holocaust.

In October Prime Minister Heger participated in the Malmo International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Anti-Semitism, where the government pledged to take concrete steps in the fight against anti-Semitism and anti-Roma attitudes and continue to address the legacy of the Holocaust. Specific steps included completion of a Holocaust museum, use of International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definitions, and application of IHRA recommendations for enhanced teaching and learning about the Holocaust, including targeted awareness-raising efforts among youth about the Holocaust and the dangers of distorting it.

On September 9, President Caputova and government officials commemorated the Day of the Victims of the Holocaust and of Racial Violence at the Holocaust Memorial in Bratislava and the Slovak Holocaust Museum in Sered. The coalition government undertook initiatives to promote Holocaust education in schools and funded school field trips to Auschwitz and the Slovak Holocaust Museum in Sered. On September 8, the government adopted a resolution marking the 80th anniversary of the so-called Jewish codex, expressing regret over crimes committed by the Slovak fascist state, particularly adoption in 1941 of the “disgraceful decree” that eventually led to deportations of Jews and their subsequent mass killings in concentration camps.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Persons with Disabilities

The law prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment, education, access to health care, the judicial system, other transportation, or the provision of other public services. The antidiscrimination law does not qualify the denial of reasonable accommodation as discrimination based on disability.

NGOs reported that persons with disabilities continued to experience several problems, particularly in access to education, transport, employment, and government as well as private services.

According to the government's commissioner for disabled persons, while a few children with disabilities participated in mainstream education, most were educated separately in so-called "special" schools that further contributed to their social isolation and stigmatization. Among the main reasons cited for the separate schooling of children with disabilities were physical barriers at state schools, lack of qualified support staff, and reluctance from teachers and parents of children without disabilities. In February the public defender of rights called on the government to abolish the "variant A" schooling for students with mild mental disability, which limited the level and type of secondary education these students could access. The *Strategy for Inclusive Approach to Education 2030*, adopted by the government in December, included "debarrierization" of education and an overhaul of education counseling services among its key priorities.

In October parliament adopted an education law reform that introduces inclusive education both as one of the principles of education and as a right of a child and student, while removing the previous rule of allowing a maximum of two children with special education needs per classroom in kindergartens. The law also aims to provide better access to counseling services for all children, including those with most serious issues requiring specialized assistance. While education experts

praised the reform's intentions, they expressed skepticism regarding its implementation due to shortage of qualified personnel at schools and lack of details on the counseling reform.

According to a March 2020 study by the Value for Money Unit of the Finance Ministry, students with disabilities constituted 11 percent of students in elementary schools, 7 percent in secondary schools, and 1 percent among university students.

NGOs and municipalities continued to report problems, including excessive administrative burden and red tape, in applying the law on opening and operating "social enterprises" that could serve to employ persons with disabilities.

Psychiatric institutions and hospitals, which fall under the purview of the Ministry of Health, used cage beds to restrain patients. Physical and nonphysical restraints in social care homes managed by the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family were prohibited by the law, except for life-threatening situations in which their use was permitted for a limited time only.

Broadcasters rarely complied with laws requiring television stations to provide audio descriptions for viewers who are blind or have impaired vision.

While the law defines mandatory standards for access to buildings, NGOs noted they were not fully implemented, although access to privately owned buildings improved more rapidly than access to public buildings. Civil society organizations and the disability rights commissioner noted that navigating most cities with a visual impairment or on a wheelchair remained difficult due to the many obstacles and barriers on sidewalks and in public transport.

The government's Council on Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality operated a committee on persons with disabilities. The council served as a governmental advisory body and included representation from NGOs working on disability problems. The country's national human rights strategy included a chapter on the rights of persons with disabilities. In May the disability rights commissioner presented an annual report to parliament summarizing progress in implementing the human rights strategy and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as providing recommendations for legislative and policy changes, based on the commissioner's own monitoring and complaints

lodged by citizens.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

LGBTQI+ organizations reported the law requires that persons seeking legal gender recognition provide confirmation from a medical practitioner that a person has undergone a “gender change” to obtain new identity documents. The law, however, does not define “gender change,” and experts criticized lack of official guidance. In practice authorities required confirmation that a person had undergone permanent sterilization before issuing new identity documents. NGOs also reported instances of public authorities not recognizing transition undergone abroad and requesting that persons undergo the process again in Slovakia.

Except in the case of university diplomas, the law does not allow educational establishments to reissue educational certificates with a new first name and surname to transgender individuals after they have transitioned. The law does allow institutions to issue such individuals new birth certificates reflecting the name with which they identify.

NGOs reported violence and online harassment of LGBTQI+ persons. In June a popular local clothing company received a wave of online anti-LGBTQI+ hate comments for posting a social media advertisement for its rainbow collection depicting two men holding hands. In May a kindergarten in Poprad issued a public apology after facing strong online backlash from parents and the public, who argued it promoted the LGBTQI+ community when it featured a rainbow in a weekly play put on by students. Also in May, a cultural center in Bratislava reported that its rainbow flag, flying in support of the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia, was torn down in broad daylight by a group of men. Organizers reported online hate speech, while an LGBTQI+ rights NGO reported an alleged violent incident took place in June in center of Bratislava only days before the Bratislava Pride month launch, during which several youths verbally assaulted a group of gay men and then proceeded to physically attack one of them, kicking him in the head, delivering multiple blows with a telescopic baton, and chasing the victim down a street. The victims later complained of inadequate reaction by police, with officers showing up late to the scene and not

taking a formal report. The case was being investigated by the National Criminal Agency. During the August rainbow pride march in Kosice, a group of approximately 20 LSNS supporters gathered in protest and attempted to block the approximately 900 marchers. There were no reports of violence.

According to an EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) survey released in 2020, more than three-quarters of Slovak same-sex couples reported fears of holding hands in public. The survey also indicated only 26 percent of members of the LGBTQI+ community openly declared their orientation and that 36 percent were afraid to visit certain sites for fear of being attacked. In total, 46 percent of members of the LGBTQI+ community felt discrimination in at least one area and at least one in five transgender and intersex persons reported being physically assaulted in the five years prior to the survey, double the number of other LGBTQI+ persons. The FRA survey found that only 8 percent of victims reported such an attack to the police and 6 percent alerted an equality body or other organization to discrimination.

The law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, education, state social services, health care, and access to goods and services and identifies sexual orientation as a hate crime motivation that warrants stiffer sentences. NGOs reported the government did not always actively enforce these laws.

On November 3, the Committee for Rights of LGBTI Persons, a permanent expert body of the Government Council for Human Rights, National Minorities, and Gender Equality chaired by the minister of justice, adopted a formal resolution expressing concerns over repeated attempts by members of parliament throughout the year to pass laws that sought to ban legal gender transition and “promotion of homosexuality” in education and media.

Other Societal Violence or Discrimination

NGOs reported online hate speech towards refugees.

Government officials at all levels and leaders from across the political spectrum engaged in rhetoric portraying refugees and Muslims as a threat to society, and several political parties used antimigrant rhetoric. The Center for the Research of

Ethnicity and Culture released a study in May that confirmed a worsening trend in public attitudes toward migrants in the country. Most respondents believed foreigners contributed to higher crime rates (65 percent) and worsened safety (62 percent). According to the study, a majority also held negative attitudes toward a “refugee from Syria” (68 percent) and a “Muslim family” (64 percent).

In September the government adopted a new policy document, *Migration Strategy 2025*, in which it committed to consider and analyze potential creation of a centralized immigration and naturalization office to provide a centralized approach not only to migration but also to integration of refugees. Civil society organizations, however, criticized the new document for retaining an outdated and inadequate integration policies.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

The law provides for the right of workers to form and join independent unions of their choice. The law also provides for unions to conduct their activities without interference, including the right to organize and bargain collectively, and workers exercised these rights. The law recognizes the right to strike with advance notice, both when collective bargaining fails to reach an agreement and in support of other striking employees’ demands (solidarity strike). Civil servants in essential services, judges, prosecutors, and members of the military do not have the right to strike. The law prohibits dismissing workers who legally participate in strikes but does not offer such protection if a strike was illegal or unofficial. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination. The law does not state whether reinstatement of workers fired for union activity is required.

The government effectively enforced applicable laws and remedies, and penalties for violations were commensurate with penalties for other laws involving the denial of civil rights. These procedures were, however, occasionally subject to delays and appeals.

Workers and unions generally exercised these rights without restrictions. The government generally respected their rights.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The law prohibits all forms of forced or compulsory labor. Police are responsible for investigating forced labor, but the government did not effectively enforce the law. The law provides strong penalties for labor traffickers, which were commensurate with those for other serious crimes but were not fully applied. The Ministry of Interior, together with the International Organization for Migration, trained government officials in identifying victims subjected to trafficking for forced labor.

There were reports by NGOs of male and female migrants forced to work in the country under conditions of forced labor, including nonpayment of wages. Migrant workers in the retail and construction sectors or employed as household help were considered particularly vulnerable. Underemployed and undereducated Roma from socially segregated rural settlements were disproportionately vulnerable to forced labor. The government carried out extensive awareness-raising campaigns on the dangers of trafficking in persons, with a focus on forced labor, and organized joint inspections of business entities to identify illegal employment and forced labor. Courts continued to issue light and suspended sentences for most convicted traffickers that failed to deter trafficking offenses or protect victims.

Also see the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibits all the worst forms of child labor. The minimum age for employment is 15, although younger children may perform light work in cultural or artistic performances, sports events, or advertising activities if it does not affect their health, safety, personal development, or schooling. The National Labor Inspectorate (NLI) and the Public Health Office must approve, determine the maximum hours, and set conditions for work by children younger than 15. The law does not permit children younger than 16 to work more than 30 hours per week on average and restricts children younger than 18 to 37.5 hours per week. The law applies to all children who are high school or full-time university students. The

law does not allow children younger than age 18 to work underground, work overtime, or perform labor inappropriate for their age or health. The violation of child and juvenile labor rules is punishable by penalties, which were commensurate with penalties for other serious crimes, although application of those penalties was not always sufficient to deter violations. The NLI did not report serious violations of laws relating to child labor.

Regional inspection units, which are under the auspices of the NLI, received and investigated child labor complaints. Apart from regional inspection units, the state Social Insurance Company was also responsible for monitoring child labor law compliance. If a unit determined that a child labor law or regulation had been broken, it transferred the case to the NLI, which may also impose fines on employers and individuals that fail to report such incidents adequately.

The government generally enforced the law effectively. Resources, inspections, and remediation were generally adequate.

There were reports Romani children in some settlements were subjected to child sex trafficking and forced marriage (see section 6, Children). NGOs reported that family members or other Roma exploited and trafficked Romani victims, including children with disabilities. Forced child labor in the form of forced begging was a problem in some communities.

d. Discrimination with Respect to Employment and Occupation

The law prohibits discrimination regarding age, religion, ethnicity, race, sex, gender, disability, language, sexual orientation, social status, or “other status” but does not specifically prohibit discrimination based on HIV status. Relevant inspection bodies provide for the protection of migrant workers against abuses from private employment agencies. The Central Office of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family and the Trade Business Office may cancel or suspend the business license of violators and impose penalties, which were commensurate with those for other civil rights laws. The government did not consistently enforce the law.

Employers discriminated against members of the Romani minority. The government continued implementing a program to increase the motivation of the long-term unemployed Roma to find jobs. The *Operational Program – Human*

Resources for 2014-20 included as one of its priorities the integration of marginalized Romani communities in the labor market through educational measures. A 2019 government report prepared by the Ministry of Finance showed that Romani jobseekers were less likely to benefit from effective active labor market measures, particularly further training and requalification, compared with the non-Romani population of jobseekers. Activists frequently alleged that employers refused to hire Roma, and an estimated 70 percent of Roma from socially excluded communities were unemployed. NGOs working with Roma from such communities reported that, while job applications by Roma were often successful during the initial phase of selection, in a majority of cases employers rejected the applicants once they found they were Roma. Rejected job applicants rarely pursued discrimination cases through the courts, and if they did, the proceedings resulted in excessive and undue delays; even successful cases awarded minimal financial compensation. Human rights NGOs noted that Romani employees from marginalized settlements were disproportionately affected by the economic downturn and subsequent layoffs caused by COVID-19 and were usually among the first employees to be released when companies began downsizing.

Despite having attained higher levels of education than men, women faced an employment gap of almost 13 percent, according to Eurostat 2020 data, and the Slovak Business Agency reported that less than 29 percent of entrepreneurs were women. Experts noted motherhood negatively affected career prospects due to long maternity and parental leave and a lack of preschool facilities and flexible work arrangements. There is no mandated paid paternal leave, which put a disproportionate care burden on women. Women earned on average 21 percent less than their male colleagues, according to the *2021 Gender Equality Index* by the European Institute for Gender Equality.

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wages and Hours Laws: The minimum wage exceeded the minimum living standard (an official estimate of the poverty income level).

The law mandates a maximum workweek of 48 hours, including overtime, except for employees in the health-care sector, whose maximum workweek is 56 hours, including overtime. Worker overtime generally could not exceed 150 hours per

year, except for health-care professionals who, in specific cases and under an agreement with labor unions, could work up to 250 hours overtime. Employees who worked overtime were entitled to a 25 percent premium on their hourly rate. Employees who work under conditions that endanger their health and safety are entitled to “relaxation” leave in addition to standard leave and an additional 35 percent of their hourly wage rate. Employees who work during government holidays are entitled to an additional 100 percent of their hourly rate. Employers who fail to follow wage and overtime rules face penalties that were commensurate with those for similar violations.

Trade unions, local employment offices, and the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Family monitored observance of these laws and determined the NLI – the authority charged with enforcing them as well as for conducting wage and hour inspections – did so effectively. The number of labor inspectors was sufficient to verify compliance with the law, and inspectors have authority to make unannounced inspections. The NLI may impose sanctions.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law establishes occupational safety and health standards that are appropriate for main industries, and the NLI generally enforced them. Workers could generally remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, and authorities effectively protected employees in this situation. The same inspectors had authority over occupational safety and health laws, and penalties were commensurate with those for similar crimes. In 2020 there were 81 accidents that caused serious workplace injuries or death and 7,525 accidents that resulted in less severe injuries.

Informal Sector: Workers in the informal economy were covered under wage, hour, occupational safety and health laws and inspections.